

Q: Good afternoon. Today is August 4th, 2016. My name is Lauren Miller and I am here at the Newton Free Library with Thomas O'Connor. Today--together we are participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. So what is your connection to Newton?

A: I used to be a custodian. I started in 1984, August of 1984, and I worked up until I believe January of 2011, but in that time I moved from Brookline to Newtonville, which was great because if my car ever broke down I could walk 10 minutes to Newton North High School, and that's my connection. I've been living in Newton, Newtonville for 13 years now, since 2003.

Q: If you lived in Newton before and after your service what did you miss most about home, aside from family and friends?

A: Well, I used to think that-- You know, you just miss all the activity, not so much, well of course you miss your family and friends, but, you know what is going on or who is doing what. You know, a few people had passed away, young people.

Q: What were you doing before you entered the service?

A: I was a high school student at Brookline High.

Q: What was your life like before you entered the service?

A: I was just a typical teenager. It was the early '70s and all the things that went with that at the time. It was pretty wild time, good time.

Q: How did you join and why did you choose that specific branch?

A: I, well, I enlisted. I went down, me and a few friends, there was three other friends, we went down. At the time the enlistment office was on Tremont Street right across from I believe Park Street Station then. So we went down and we all enlisted. I didn't have any plans after high school so, you know, I saw this as an opportunity maybe to go to Germany or something or overseas, and so the four of us went in and enlisted and then we all went in together in June, 23rd, and went together in Basic Training. And three of us went through Basic Training and school together, and two of my friends went to Germany, and I got to stay right in Oklahoma, which I don't regret. I met a lot of nice people. And it was only for two years too, so I didn't think two years was not such a bad deal.

Q: How did you adapt to military life, including the physical regime, barracks, food, and social life?

A: Well, I'll put it this way: I was in no shape, that was, you know. I did try to jog a little bit, maybe a mile around the old, well it's still there, the Brookline Reservoir, and so I would do it a couple times and think, "Yeah I'm ready to go." But I wasn't. And so yeah, they keep you going with the physical training. The food was good, I thought. And they would, you always go, go, go, and so when it was time to go to sleep you were ready. You would, because you had to get up at I think 4:30, 5 o'clock. And then I wasn't used to folding clothes and all, and being organized, and they make you organized. You know, your socks have to be rolled up and underwear and this and that, and uniforms, you can't be missing buttons or any holes or anything. You had to look good all the time. So it was an experience.

Q: And did you like the structure there?

A: Yeah, I've been told I do good in a structured environment.

Q: How did you stay in touch with family and friends back home?

A: Back then it would be writing or the old telephone. “Will you accept a Collect Call from Thomas O’Connor?” “Yeah we’ll accept it.” And then after calling too many times they would say, “You can’t be calling. It’s long distance.” I’d say, “Okay I get the hint.” I was just so excited, you know, that’s all. Try to get the latest gossip, anything if I could catch up on.

Q: Do you remember arriving where you served? And what was it like?

A: I remember we all used to meet, well the day we left I think we took our oath and then we went to Logan Airport, then flew to Louisville, and then they had like two buses, and I ended up, they had so many people, that I ended up standing. A bunch of us had to stand because there was no more room in the seats. Got to Fort Knox, Kentucky, maybe an hour and a half, and then they gave us, well, you know, they fed us, but they gave us a little lecture and they fed us that night, and they didn’t wake us up like they normally would so early, because they knew we just came in late at night. And so I just remember the next morning hearing people running. “One, two, three.” Uht-oh. I think a lot of people thought, “Oh my god, what did I get into?”

Q: Tell me about a few of your most memorable experiences.

A: Well, I can’t remember them all, but I remember one time when we were shooting at Fort Sill I was on the phone and they will say like, “Fire mission” and they would say like, “Four rounds,” they would tell you how much powder you needed, and then they would say, “Deflection,” which is this way, and then “Quadrant,” that way. And then I would yell it out and give it to the Section Chief who was a Sargent and the Gunner. And so we shot. And then one day they said, “Okay, stop. Everybody get to the back of the gun.” So I said, “Oh jeez, I don’t know but this ain’t good.” And what happened was we had, I don’t even know if I should say this, but it was so long ago, they have a forward observer, which is an Officer, and he gives you, he gives the quadrants and deflections and everything, and I don’t think he had done that yet, but we still had

the fire mission and we actually shot off of Fort Sill, and we were told that there was a guy out there with a tractor or something hearing [whistle] and luckily he didn't get hurt or something. But they had civilians and all these top Officers, and I thought, "Uht-oh, I'm going to Leavenworth. I just got in for goodness' sakes." But they found it was the forward observer or something was messed up [whew].

Q: Any other experiences?

A: Yeah, I never knew how to drive a standard, so they were asking for drivers, so I said, "Here is my big opportunity to learn how to drive a standard." So we went to like a driving school. Back then they had the Jeeps. They still have the deuce and a half trucks, the five tons, the Jeeps, and so I would learn. And I don't know how I got my license, but they gave it to me, and so whenever we were going to different places they would have a convoy, maybe 10 trucks, and they would load up the trucks, and I was always trying to be at the last, the end, because I was not used to this, you know, taking the foot off the clutch. And so I really dreaded hills, because when you're on a hill you've got to let out the clutch and step on the gas, and you don't want to stall out, but you don't want to roll back too far, because there is another truck.

And I can remember guys were screaming in the back of the truck for a new driver and everything and "This guy is going to kill us," but I stuck it out. And so I got to learn how to drive a standard, which was a nice thing, I thought, at the time.

Q: Are there any particularly humorous or exciting memories from when you were on leave?

A: No, I think I took my first leave Christmas of '76. I came home and, you know, saw a lot of friends and everything and got to do a few things, and I think my parents were a little disappointed, because I came home and they were there, it was my mother, father, a couple of my aunts, and they thought I might be in uniform, in my dress greens, but it was still right after

the Vietnam War, so it was still like a, so I said, "Man I'm putting on my ripped jeans and my shirt." And I just remember the disappointment when I came in. You know, you get off the airplane and you walk through. The looks on their faces when they look like Joe Schmo or ragamuffin or something. They were so disappointed. But I, you know, that's, hey, I was, I wear enough of the uniform, you know, at work, so I just wanted to, except for the short hair, I just wanted to fit in with civilian clothes.

Q: Do you recall the day your service ended?

A: Yes I do. It was, I think I got out a little early, because I had a month's vacation that I didn't take, so I got out, instead of June I got out in May, and I brought one of my roommates back with me. He had never been. He was from Texas and he had never been to Boston, so I brought him up. He had a pretty good time. And I remember bringing him on the Green Line. It was the old trolleys then. And they had the screeching and squealing. And I remember getting to Boylston Street, you know it takes that turn, and he was holding his ears. He couldn't believe how loud it was. I felt sorry for him, but even today I'm not used to it. I was on the trolley today and that's the same thing, even with the new trolleys, they still, that screeching sound. You would think it was just my first time ever being in the subway. I could never get used to that sound.

Q: What was it like to return to civilian life?

A: It was really strange, because even though I did come home once in '76 for Christmas just even two years of not being home I lost like, I felt like I lost touch with everything. You know, I had missed a lot and you're trying to get comfortable with friends. I had I mean a close group of friends, but other people that you knew to say hello and everything. Some people probably didn't even know I was away and some people, it was just to get back in touch with everything.

And then plus when we, when I got back I think we lived for maybe about another month or two before we moved, but we still stayed in Brookline, and I brought my, when I drove home from Oklahoma, Fort Sill, I brought my roommate and my '67 Chevy Impala and we drove all the way, I think I drove all the way. I don't even think he drove at all. And I remember driving to New York City and it was like rush hour, and people were beeping at me, and I thought, "Oh that's just New York traffic." People were giving me the bird and finger and everything. I said, "Jesus, I don't know what the-- Was it my Oklahoma license plates?"

So I got to eventually pull over and I had no brake lights. So every time I hit the brake, you know that's the first thing people who are right behind you, they see those lights come on they know to stop, and when they don't see those lights and you stop, if they're not paying attention they'd crash right into you, but I didn't, no problem there. And then I had that car for maybe another few months before it got smashed up.

Q: Because of the brake lights?

A: No, unfortunately that wasn't the reason, but yeah. But when I think about it, '67 Chevy Impala, well I got out in '77 so it was only 10 years old, but when you tell somebody '67 Chevy, because I was 10 years old in '67. I remember that was the year the Red Sox, the Impossible Dream, so yeah it was nice.

Q: How did your service and experiences affect your life and your outlook on war and the military in general?

A: Well, I know, like they said, you weren't drafted, you were in the new volunteer Army, but there were a lot of leftover, like, Sergeants, or maybe they weren't Sergeants at the time, but they became Sergeants who did see service. I think I had a Drill Sergeant and he was always acting a little strange, and then finally someone asked the other Drill Sergeant, "Why is he like off the

wall or something? Something's not right." And then they told us that he was a prisoner of war for a little while, but he decided to stay in and became a Drill Sergeant, so now everybody kind of knew why he was off the wall a little bit. He was a good Drill Sergeant, but he just wasn't all there. And then, you know, getting back in shape and wanting to quit all the time and, "I'm not going to make it." But I would look at other people and say, "If these, this guy or these guys can do it I can stick it out." And you're just looking forward to graduation.

And I remember the first few weeks you didn't do anything, really it was all training. I don't even, I don't think the first few weeks you could even write home. I can't remember. And then they finally, like in Basic Training they finally let you go and you could have a few beers and all that stuff, and so that was nice. You would go to the, they call it the E123 Club, which is Privates, the NCO club would be for Corporals and specialists or somebody like E4 and above, and you would see all the people and everybody couldn't wait to have the beers. I had quit smoking before I went in, but one of the things is you have to pick up cigarette butts, they called it police detail, so after picking up hundreds of butts I said, "To hell with this, I'm going to smoke if I have to pick them up." So I started smoking again. But I was so glad when I graduated, boy I tell you. It was a great feeling.

Q: What would you like people to know 100 years from now?

A: Well, I hope the United States is still around. You know, I hope there is no more wars, but this, this Middle East War has been going for like 14 years now and it was, I mean who knows when it's going to end. So, I mean I don't like war, but I have like a history of relatives, uncles and stuff that were in the military, so not going to college and not having a job lined up and not really having any plans it was kind of like, "I'll take the easy route and go in the military for a couple years and then I'll have all the things, everything will be all planned out and I'll be all set and I'll know what I want to do by then." But when I got out it was the same thing.

Q: Anything else you would like to add?

A: No. Probably when I start walking home I'll think like a hundred things, but right now I wouldn't be able to, not right now. It was a great experience. I don't regret it for one second. And like I say, I was in a peace time. From - I went in June of '75 to June, well I got out early, but June of '77, honorably discharged. And it was like my college experience, because when I, well Basic Training you were in these big rooms with all these other soldiers and then school, when I left Fort Knox, Kentucky, I went to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, it was the old World War Two barracks. They still had those around. So you had an upstairs, downstairs, and then you had the latrine. [Ringing] Oh sorry. I should have shut it off, but nobody calls me, but now I'm being interviewed. And I told her too. Alright, sorry.

Now I lost my train of thought. Where was I? Oh, the latrine. So, it was a latrine and you had the showers in there, but it was like 20 toilets, no stalls, it was like just 20 toilets, like this. So that was an experience, because you like privacy, and so when, you know, you have to go to the bathroom, and especially in the morning you're sitting with 20 other guys and everybody is doing the same thing, and there is no privacy until you got into another building or something. So that was a new experience. I never done that before.

And then you had like each group would have someone who would have the latrine duty. [Ringing] Oh come on. I hung up and I thought they would get it. I'm going to shut it off now. I told her I was going to the interview at 2:30 up here and so she calls me anyway. Sorry about that.

Q: Do you still keep in touch with any of your fellow veterans?

A: No, I just, when I brought the, one of my roommates up-- I, um, well yeah, we'll stay in touch and everything. I think he wrote me one letter of the friends we used to hang out with. It's just

like high school. You have different cliques and it's the same way in the Army. So he would give me some news. And jeez I like to think I wrote him back one letter, but I don't think I did. I was like, you know, I'm back in Brookline, the Army is over with, I don't want nothing to do with it. It's time to move on. But I probably should have wrote him back a letter. So I regret that, if I have anything, never writing him back and staying in touch. The only thing I have is photographs of the people I used to hang out with, so I'm glad I got those anyway, memories up here and in photographs.

Q: Anything else you can think of to add?

A: No, not right offhand. I'm sorry. I wish I could. It kind of, at the time when I went in it seemed like it was never going to get over, but the two years went by pretty fast. And then there was one unit that I was in, they were going to Germany, but I had less than a year in, so they didn't want to send me over there. You have to have at least 12 or 13 months in to go overseas, so I tried to enlist for a few months, but they wouldn't do it, so I stayed in Oklahoma. But I had a great time. You know, you met a lot of interesting people and stuff like that, so yeah it was a good, great, experience for two years, so I have no regrets. And I'm glad it wasn't wartime either, because being in a combat arm thing, artillery, you kind of train for that, and there's like a little guilt that I wasn't ever in real battle, but then you see wounded people coming back with missing arms or limbs and stuff like that, you know, and just messed up and you say, "You know what, I shouldn't complain," because well World War Two, then there was Korea, then there was a lull period until the early '60s when they started. So, when I was in high school in '71 it was still going on, but I think they were just in the process of starting to withdraw troops then, so they really weren't sending anybody over there, they were just pulling people out. So yeah, I should be-- I'm very grateful today I guess I did miss it.

Q: Well, it looks like our time is just about up. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this with us. We are really happy to be able to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History Project.

A: Well thank you very much. I appreciate it. And I can't wait to see when everything is finished and you've talked to other veterans and stuff, just to see the final results. So thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW